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ABSTRACT

Field experiences in preservice teacher education may be both valuable and problematic. Problems may arise from: (1) previous experiences of teachers and teaching; (2) previous experiences in classrooms; (3) the potential influence of the norms and values of the setting; (4) the difficulties of relating theory and practice; (5) the challenge of developing intercultural understanding; and (6) the nature of teaching itself. Local organizational choices and modifications, such as wise and careful selection of schools and effective liaisons between the school and college, could help to alleviate these problems. The teacher education curriculum should be modified to include multicultural education for preservice teachers. Teacher preparation programs must also teach their students to recognize and analyze preconceptions which may stem from their individual interactions and experiences with teachers and in schools and classrooms. (CB)

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OVERCOMING THE PROBLEMS OF FIELD EXPERIENCES IN TEACHER EDUCATION : CULTURAL DIMENSIONS

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Overcoming the problems of field experiences in teacher education

Field experiences have long been accepted as an important and necessary part of teacher education. Their persistence and acceptance stem in part from an implicit trust in the value of practical experiences. Indeed, the need for field experiences appears self-evident to many - a *sine qua non* for certification. The term 'field experiences' refers to all activities engaged in in schools and classrooms. They allow the student teacher to gain first hand knowledge of children, classrooms, teachers and teaching. Early field experiences and student teaching are the two formal institutional arrangements for these activities. The former is usually of short duration, occurs prior to student teaching, and offers possibilities for a variety of classroom-related activities. During student teaching, one assumes responsibility for some or all teaching over a period of approximately 8-16 weeks (Hersh et al, 1982).

There is much evidence that student teachers consider field experiences, particularly student teaching as a very worthwhile, perhaps the most valuable par' of their teacher preparation (Conant, 1963, Lortie, 1975). On the other hand, researchers have questioned the value of field experiences, citing their undesirable outcomes and unanticipated consequences. They note the shift away from positive educational or professional attitudes, the adoption of the practices and attitudes of the co-operating teacher (e.g. Yee, 1969, Friebus, 1977), the development of a custodial approach in interacting with children (Hoy and Rees, 1977) and the development of a utilitarian perspective to teaching (Tabachnick et el, 1982). Because of the conceptual and methodological weaknesses of most of

these studies, they do not reflect the totality of the field experience or significant aspects of it (Zeichner, 1984). For example, a focus on one or a few aspects of the experience ignores its ecological nature, and its value to student teachers. Nevertheless, the contrast between the views of researchers and participants is striking.

These views suggest that field experiences - as presently conducted - may be both valuable and problematic. Since field experiences represent a distinct occasion for learning to teach, these contrasting views are a challenge to teacher educators. We need to recognize the special and unique value of field experience, to acknowledge the problems inherent in learning from practical experiences and to devise ways to overcome them.

This paper addresses some of these issues. It examines the ways in which the student teachers' experience and values, as well as the values inherent in the culture of the school can help or hinder learning from experiences in the field. The paper is in two parts. Part discusses some problems of learning from field experiences, with illustrations from research conducted in Jamaica. The second part considers ways in which the problems of learning from experience can be overcome. The paper concludes with some solutions and recommendations for teacher education. First however, I shall begin by discussing practical field experiences as an occasion for learning to teach.

Practical experiences in the real world of the school and the classroom offer unique opportunities for learning to teach. First, both early field experiences and student teaching allow student teachers to develop propositional understandings or awareness (Wilson, 1975), i.e., a knowledge of the specifics of the practical world or the fact that such and so is the case. Second, they are able to instantiate or see concrete examples of categories and concepts previously learned. For example, during early field experience, the student teacher may see the classroom

teacher employing a strategy which is identifiable as a reinforcement technique. Or the classroom teacher may be seen to use different kinds of questioning. Third, the natural setting of the classroom provides the chance to see the effects of behaviours and actions. Fourth, the student teacher becomes aware of the many variables that need to be taken into account when teaching (Wilson, 1975). In carrying out the procedures or rules of an activity, one is able to read into a situation and adjust what is done to what is detected. Fifth, the student teacher learns what it is really like to carry out an activity. One can use the term know-how in this case, a knowledge difficult to articulate but which makes one confident in the ability to carry out a task. This tacit knowledge is akin to what Oakeshott (1962) terms practical knowledge. Practical knowledge is developed and is usually elicited in relation to particular instances. This knowledge can therefore only be acquired in the field. It is there also that the student teacher can gain access to the practical knowledge of the classroom teacher, acquired through his/her experience. Sixth, one gains confidence after successful completion of some teaching activities. This confidence is related to the tacit and other knowledge acquired but is as much a result of crossing the crucial psychological barrier of doing something one fears for the first time. Finally, it is possible to achieve one of the oft-repeated goals of teacher education and field experience - to relate theory and practice, or the knowledge gained in college classes with what is observed in the field. These outcomes are unique to field experiences. But they are possible only in principle. They do not occur automatically. The conditions essential to their achievement will be examined in Part 2. But first I shall consider some problems of learning from experience in the field.

Part One

The Problems of learning from field experiences

Achieving the outcomes discussed so far is not always easy or straightforward. The problems which student teachers encounter stem from the following :

1) Previous experiences of teachers and teaching
2) Previous experiences of classrooms
3) The potential influence of the norms and values of the setting
4) The difficulties of relating theory and practice
5) Developing inter-cultural understanding.
6) The nature of teaching itself.

1. Familiarity with teaching

Students who enter classrooms return to a familiar world. They have spent years of participant observation in similar settings watching teachers carry out more or less similar duties and playing comparable roles. Activities such as teaching have a discernible pattern (Oakeshott, 1962). A person who detects such patterns can easily come to believe that they are easily imitated. After all, asks Lortie (1975), what child cannot "do a reasonably accurate portrayal of a classroom teacher's actions?" (p. 62). These patterns of teaching derived from the actions of former teachers constitute a cognitive repertoire which may compete with any principles, concepts or teaching strategies learned in college, even in cases where the teacher has made a conscious decision to implement the principle. During the second and the third year of Practice Teaching (*Note 1*), Brenda* looked forward to teaching lessons in science, when she would concentrate

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* Brenda, Sarah and Rema are the three student teachers who participated in an ethnographic study of student teaching conducted by the author. All names are fictitious.

on involving children in activities and getting them to learn from these activities rather than from her expository teaching. In one of Brenda's early science lessons on the water cycle, she had as an objective to get children to recognize the process of evaporation and condensation by performing an experiment. The lesson built on a previous one in which she had discussed these two concepts. She began by attempting to elicit the definition. When her attempts failed, she gave the definition, requesting several times that the children repeat after her. She then performed an experiment with boiling water in which droplets of water formed on a cold surface above. Throughout, she posed questions to direct children's observations to the crucial aspects of the experiment. However, she continued to insist on children stating the definitions and giving a description of the water cycle in the words she had used. She scolded one girl for using the word 'sweat' to refer to the formation of droplets of water. At the end of the lesson her efforts to have children repeat the definition were not wholly successful. As seatwork, pupils were asked to explain the water cycle. Brenda read the finished work of one boy then shook her head in dismay. She then explained to me and Sarah "He understands it but can't explain it. He says the water goes around in a circle rather than a cycle". Yet when I read the explanation, he clearly understood the concept, though he had not used Brenda's words to describe it.

In this example, we see the influence of the cognitive repertoire - the intrusion of previous patterns of teaching i.e. the emphasis on the teacher's definitions and their use as indicators of learning. The content of this repertoire is familiar, cathected and safe, easily resorted to when uncertainty arises. Though Brenda met her objective of including

activities and getting children involved, her emphasis on definitions focussed pupils' attention and mental energy on recalling what the teacher said rather than on thinking about what could be deduced from the experiment. The intrusion of previous patterns affected the successful implementation of the new method. Thus she pursued contradictory goals of rote and concept learning. This reliance on definitions was evident in many of the lessons observed.

This familiarity with the classroom and with teaching poses another threat to optimal learning in the field. Student teachers who observe recognizable behaviours or situations may not feel impelled to analyze those observations or to connect them to pedagogical concepts and principles. They more likely make interpretations that fit their personal experience, in the same way that individuals make quick inferences in everyday life. But when a student teacher acts on those inferences without reflection, or interprets without reference to a wider set of concepts, his/her response may be pedagogically ineffective or inappropriate. Learning from the encounter is limited.

This was evident in the peer evaluation sessions which formed part of the Year II Practice Teaching. Students who were assigned in teams to a classroom and took turns teaching were expected to critique each others teaching. Though student teachers were given a set of criteria for evaluation, they did not always use them (See Evans, in press). They often relied on personal opinion or their own personal experience. In critiquing an unsuccessful Music lesson taught by Brenda, (in which Grade 3 pupils were to learn and reproduce the beats of different musical notes) Sarah felt that Brenda spent too much time on the repetition of the sounds. She ought to have included some theory at the beginning.

Brenda replied that there was not enough time to include theory and in any event "the tutor didn't think it was necessary, she looked at the lesson plan". (EV. #2 p. 3). Rema agreed with Sarah, recalling her music teacher's procedures. Brenda insisted "I think the important thing is to know the sound of the ta ta te". Sarah was unmoved "I don't know, but people need background".

In this example, personal views of teaching and one's own experience were not challenged but used to justify a teaching approach. In a similar vein, Sandy at the end of Practice Teaching did not feel that audio-visual aids were important in or necessary to teaching. Her goal was to be able to go out and teach without a lesson plan. The problem here is two-fold. First, these patterns or points of view may not represent good pedagogical practice. Second, engaging in such practice is not thoughtful or informed teaching. The patterns were internalized from a student's rather than a teacher's perspective. The pedagogical considerations that informed these external patterns are not accessible to the pupil. Lortie argues that unless student teachers gain some 'cognitive control' of their experiences as students, they will tend to re-enact these patterns previously learned, and be disinclined to analyze their experience. When this occurs, the value of the experience is compromised.

2. Previous Experiences of Classrooms

Student teachers are not only familiar with teachers and teaching but with classrooms. Their knowledge of classrooms like that of teaching was developed from the perspective of a student, a peer of thirty, forty or fifty other students. They have not yet learned to look at classrooms and what happens there in conceptual terms. Furthermore they tend to notice

the same aspects over time. "It is the rare teacher who is aware that observations are always selective in nature .... and that one of the most potent sources of selection is one's own personal values", (Sarason, et al, 1962, p. 79). Thus in reflecting on a lesson, a student may focus on classroom management, ignoring other aspects of the lesson which deserve attention. This is what occurred during some of the Peer Evaluation sessions. Though they were given a number of criteria for evaluating the lessons taught by others, they did not use them systematically. They often made mention of just one aspect of the lesson. An example is Sarah's comment on Rema's Language Arts lesson.

> "The sound of the 'h' should be used properly so that the children can use it".

At other times they would refer to pupil response only or classroom management only in commenting on a lesson.

Without some prior tutoring in how to look in classrooms, student teachers may miss many of the subtleties of teaching or use a limited set of concepts in appraising what they see. This also limits learning from the encounter. ~~is limited~~.

3. Occurrence in Natural Settings

A third problem of learning from field experiences is their occurrence in natural settings not specifically planned for the education of the teacher. Teacher education institutions are dependent on the good will of schools and teachers to provide classrooms in which student teachers can observe and teach. Their control over the learning environment is limited to the choice of school. Student teachers are often exhorted to 'fit in' and not disturb or change what they encounter.

But the prevailing norms of the school - what is acceptable, expected or encouraged - may not be educative or reflective of what college personnel wish student teachers to learn. People adopt the behaviours required of a situation (Becker, 1970) and student teachers are no exception.

In Jamaica, college tutors normally place an injunction against corporal punishment of any kind. At the start of early field experiences, the student teachers expressed dismay at the use of the strap by many classroom teachers. Yet, after three weeks of student teaching Brenda admitted her use of physical punishment and expressed her ambivalence in this way:

> "They said that the children should't be punished .... But there are times when I found it necessary to punish children like stand in that corner and so on and occasionally you find that you may have to hit one or two to get their attention .... but not beating you know". (I 6/6).

Brenda's experience illustrates the powerful influence which beliefs, values, and practices encountered in the field can have on what student teachers do and learn to accept. These beliefs, values and practices exercise this influence in a subtle and unconscious way because they often fit the cognitive repertoire or the learning accumulated from previous experiences.

4. Relating Theory and Practice

One of the professed benefits of field experiences is the opportunity to bring theory and practice together. The instantiation of concepts - connecting a concept to a particular classroom event - is one way. Another is the use of classroom events to understand more fully the meaning of a concept/theory. For often the meaning and the implication of a theory

become apparent only when there is concrete data against which it can be examined. However, unless the right conditions for reflection exist, this will not occur. Reflection, puzzlement and uncertainty rarely occur in an evaluative context where student teachers understandably emphasize whatever will enhance their chances of meeting examination requirements.

The third - using theory to guide what one does is an expectation often held by supervisors of student teachers. Indeed they sometimes blame the student teacher's lack of interest, motivation and commitment to excellence for this failure to apply theory. But the mental processes or the sequence of thoughts involved in making this application are more complex than appears on the surface. First, student teachers have to recognize that a given classroom situation can be improved or resolved by some pedagogical concept and not by everyday ways of reacting and interpreting. Second, they have to see the relevance of a particular concept or principle learned in college. This means that this knowledge has to be available in memory and clearly understood. Third, they must know or be able to determine how a given principle is translated into action, what specific actions are required in the situation. They have, in other words, to 'operationalize' the principle (Hayes-Roth, et al, 1981). Finally, they must have the skills to execute. There are potential problems at each of these four steps. First, they may not recognize that the situation can be addressed by knowledge learned in college. The competing cognitive repertoire may make it seem natural to respond in familiar ways. At the second step, they may not see the relevance of any pedagogical concept. Cohn (1979) found that student teachers while in the field do not often think of what they learned in college. Or they may misunderstand the concept or principle. This is what Sarah did when in our interview she gave

examples to support her claim that "the theory that you get in college are (sic) so far removed from the practicals". She related a classroom management technique which had proved unsuccessful, and dismissed the principle on which it was based and which she claimed she had learned in college. This was taking away the unpleasant and replacing it with the pleasant - a procedure which she felt, fails because children like and hold on to what is unpleasant. Sarah either misunderstood reinforcement theory or confused this theory with another. Misunderstanding of a principle may be one reason why one's initial efforts fail (Hayes-Roth, etal, 1981). From this experience Sarah concluded that theory was unworkable - "so far removed from the practicals".

At the third step, they may have a sound understanding of theory but lack the ability to translate it into action. The fourth and final step is one of the stated aims of student teaching - to 'practice' skills - yet even here, previous patterns of teaching may be a safe and familiar alternative to a student teacher faced with anxiety and uncertainty. We have already seen an example of the intrusion of previous patterns.

5. Developing inter-cultural understanding

In Jamaican primary and all-age schools, recent evidence suggests that teachers and student teachers are from roughly the same background as their students - though there is a preponderance of those from a rural peasant background. Thus they are familiar with the life styles and behaviours of low-income children, lacking perhaps only in knowledge of children from urban ghettoes. However, these teachers by virtue of their entry into the profession or their socialization in the colleges have adopted middle class values and may reject the behaviours encountered in schools and classrooms. Some teachers with a middle class background may misinterpret behaviours or falsely attribute intentions. Thus Brenda was heard to say during the first week of

Practice Teaching

> "The children here do not show enough respect ....
> And they will come and ask you to mark this, without
> saying please".

On another occasion, they expressed shock that children were so "unruly". Negative reactions can alter the pupil-teacher relationship. Part of learning to teach is to observe and understand such behaviours without resorting to negative evaluations or punishment.

6. The Nature of Teaching itself

A final problem of learning from field experience stems from the nature of teaching itself. To the novice, the mere engagement in teaching can have an aura of success. Going through the motions of greeting children, giving directions, explaining and answering questions with a majority of pupils paying attention can be satisfying. But this surface appearance may have little to do with the central goals of teaching. Furthermore, children's overt responses which can provide clues to the impact of one's teaching can be ambiguous and therefore misleading to the learner teacher. Without guidance and direction, student teachers can mis-read the consequences of their actions or in Wilson's (1975) words "marry experience with success".

Part Two

Overcoming the Problems of Learning from Experience in Teacher Education

In this second part, I shall examine ways in which five of these six problems can be overcome. I shall not address the norms and values of the setting. This demands local organizational choices and modifications such as wise and careful selection of schools (in cases where a sufficient number exist) and diligent liaising between the school and the college.

1. Overcoming the problem of previous experiences

The two consequences of familiarity with teaching - a competing repertoire of practices and assumptions, and a disinclination to analyze - can be addressed by what Lortie (1975) terms "gaining cognitive control" of previous experiences. He suggests one possible way in which this can be done, allowing student teachers to "dredge up their experience and subject it to careful scrutiny" in order to increase awareness of beliefs and preferences about teaching (p. 231). This can be done by carefully thought out exercises. For example, new recruits to the teacher education programme can reflect on their favourite teacher and examine what they found admirable. Videotapes of a variety of teaching styles can be analyzed with a similar aim in view. Unless these preconceptions are acknowledged, attempts to introduce new ideas and methods may produce meagre results. For in learning, "whatever is imparted is nourished by what is already there" (Oakeshott, 1962, p. 12).

2. Overcoming the problem of familiarity with the setting

Students' familiarity with classrooms is one reason why they focus on a few obvious and familiar aspects of the classroom. Another reason is the multi-dimensional nature of classroom life and the fast pace at which events occur. Student teachers have to learn to look in a new way. Their attention has to be directed to those selected features which are important. One way of focussing attention on significant aspects of the classroom is to specify in advance what should be observed. This is especially critical during early field experiences. An observation instrument or a checklist can serve this purpose. Yet this approach is not without difficulties. Instantiation of concepts may not always be straightforward. For example, during early field experiences, it is fairly easy

for a student teacher to note the variety of ways in which a teacher introduces a lesson. It is more complex to recognize instances of say reinforcement, precisely because an inference has to be made. Though the student teacher may understand the concept of reinforcement, he/she needs to observe a behaviour or event and then make an inference regarding the presence or absence of a particular quality. This inference may not occur or may be inaccurate. It is for this reason that learning is optimized when the student teacher receives the guidance of a more experienced and knowledgeable person to help him/her make a connection between that concept and a particular instance. This suggests a crucial role for the supervising teacher and especially for the classroom teacher who is more aware of what the student teacher experiences on a continuing basis.

3. Relating theory and practice

The instantiation of concepts is one way in which theory and practice can be linked. Many teacher educators and others have given thought to alternative ways in which this can be achieved. One is to re-examine the teaching of theory. Lortie (1975) blames the absence of an 'analytic turn of mind' on 'compartmentalized instruction' and calls for more integration in formal preparation. Entwistle (1976) in addressing a related issue - the value and timing of theory, argues that "theorizing is most helpful to practise when it is an ad hoc kind of activity carried on in close association with practice" (p. 45). Entwistle's suggestion would, no doubt, create a change from the learning of theories in classrooms to theorizing in practice. This Cohn (1981) has done with what she calls situational teaching, a model of supervision which aims to help student teachers draw relationships between ideas learned in college and particular classroom situations. This strategy was a response to her discovery that

student teachers while in the field do not often think of these ideas (Cohn, 1979). Unlike Entwistle, Cohn assumes that theory is taught in college, and that in the field some re-teaching is necessary, characterized by interpretation rather than application. Cohn recognizes that practice allows one to fully understand a concept and as well, to discover and 'see' new relationships and connections between what is seen and confronted in the classroom and concepts such as those related, for example, to children's characteristics and behaviour, or classroom management. Part of the college supervisor's role is to help the student teacher to see or make these connections.

When the aim is to use theory to guide skill development, the supervisor or the classroom teacher (if she/he is knowledgeable of supervisory principles) is a key person in all four stages, but especially in helping the student teacher to operationalize and execute the skill. In this regard, demonstration teaching is helpful though it needs to be coupled with explanations and discussions. For in learning through observation or modelling, the learner must have access to the actor's goals and intentions at crucial decision points (Olson and Bruner, 1974).

4. Developing inter-cultural understanding

Two solutions are offered for overcoming the problem of inter-cultural differences. First, one can modify the curriculum of teacher education to include characteristics of low-income children - their culture, values, behaviours and life styles. This knowledge can be infused in existing subjects such as Psychology and Social Studies. Secondly, we can plan exercises which allow the student teacher to study

the behaviour of children in the classroom context, and more importantly to have their descriptions, evaluations and assumptions challenged through discussion and critique. This would expose them to alternative interpretations of what is observed. This kind of activity is ideally suited for early field experiences.

5. Including success in experience

How can we avoid marrying experience with success? For it is relatively easy to gain a false sense of success by merely engaging in activities. Olson and Bruner's (1974) analysis of learning from experience points to the crucial role that discussions in situ can play. Recommendations in this and the previous sections would ensure that perceptions are guided, that alternative interpretations are available when learning from a direct encounter, and that goals and intentions are communicated during observational learning. But beyond this, what would make for success? Action in teaching, centers on the curriculum and children's learning of that curriculum. For the central goals of teaching are getting children to learn and helping them create meaning. Learning to teach during field experiences would therefore mean learning how to organize subject matter for a particular group of students, thinking of ways of helping them to learn it and refining one's knowledge by seeing the effects of these efforts. When this is accepted as central, the data of field experiences become the object of reflection and learning. The student teacher reflects on the extent to which particular choices of organization of subject matter and of teaching/learning methods have contributed to learning. This question would be a primary concern of the student teacher and would be central to the discussions between the

student teacher and the supervisor or classroom teacher. But when we place knowledge and the creation of meaning at the heart of the teaching process, we also recognize that learning to teach is continuous. For

> "the act of teaching as a representation of knowledge is inherently problematic .... Teaching which accepts fidelity to knowledge as a criterion can never be judged adequately and rest content. Teachers must be educated to develop their art, not to master it, for the claim to mastery merely signals the abandoning of aspiration."
>
> (Stenhouse, 1983, p. 189)

NOTE 1: In the teacher education programme under study, thirteen weeks are devoted to Teaching Practice, a term that includes both early field experience and student teaching. These 13 weeks are distributed over the three years as follows : Year 1 one week, Year 2 - four weeks and Year 3, eight weeks.

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